DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 296 SO 026 893

AUTHOR McCarthy, Maureen A.; Horn, Elaine M.
TITLE An Examination of Moral Development in Specific Subpopulations.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Codes of Ethics; Ethical Instruction; Ethnic Groups; Global Approach; Higher Education; *Individual Development; *Moral Development; *Moral Values; Personality Development; Social Values; Values

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study to investigate measurement of moral reasoning with respect to age. Additional potential influencing factors, including ethnicity, gender, and influence of early environmental factors, also have been included for analysis in this study. Twenty-seven nontraditional students participating in a new student orientation program formed the sample for the study. The measurement of moral judgment is based upon reasons that individuals offer for decisions related to fair behaviors. Comparison of results from this study to the normative sample suggest that the experience gained in a postsecondary environment significantly impacts the overall level of moral development. In this study, global mean scores did not significantly differ with respect to gender. Preliminary results suggest that living in a rural environment may impede the progress of moral reasoning. Further research is suggested among this emerging majority of students who could provide valuable support for improvement of a more integrated educational curriculum emphasizing tolerance and respect for individuals within an increasingly global society. Contains 18 references. (EH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 407 296

An Examination of Moral Development in Specific Subpopulations

Maureen A. McCarthy, Austin Peay State University
Elaine M. Horn, Austin Peay State University

Presented at the Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, NY
April 8-12, 1996

SO026893

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Maureen A. McCarthy

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Presented at the 1996 meeting of the American Research Association, New York, NY.

An Examination of Moral Development in Specific Subpopulations

Maureen A. McCarthy and Elaine M. Horn
Austin Peay State University

Higher education has been tasked with a variety of responsibilities including the edict to expand the horizons of students and to build a community which is reflective of a broader democratic society. Embedded within this directive, development of moral character assumes a heightened sense of urgency. However, progress toward this goal can be assessed only if measurement of the construct of moral reasoning can be refined in a fashion that enhances sensitivity to developmental change. Measurement of the construct moral reasoning is inherently complex partially due to an infinite number of individual characteristics and environmental influences. It has been suggested (Kitchener, 1982) that moral development is dependent upon several factors, with age imposing a substantial influence. Examination of age dependent moral development is a particular challenge, yet investigation of the non-traditional student population offers potential insight into this aspect of moral development.

Minimal research has been conducted to examine the moral development of non-traditional students who are typically older than traditional students (Kilgannon & Erwin, 1992). While Rest and Thoma (1985) argued that individuals who continued through college were more likely to advance their levels of moral development, it has been difficult to partition the influence of age from education.

Kitchener, King, Davison, Parker and Wood (1984) found that principled moral reasoning continues to more fully develop in middle adult years. This finding was based upon measurement of graduate students' moral reasoning however, it remains unclear if these differences are the result of aging or characteristics that are unique to graduate students. Developmental levels of returning adult undergraduate students could provide evidence of specific levels of moral functioning of adults not yet formally engaged in postsecondary education. Entering students who are older are potentially motivated by different developmental needs thus serving to delineate differences in age and education that have been confounded in previous studies (Mason & Gibbs, 1993). Therefore, the primary emphasis of this study is to investigate measurement of moral reasoning with respect to age. Additional potential influencing factors which include ethnicity, gender, and influence of early environmental factors, have also been included for analysis in this study.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Theoretical Constructs

Measurement of moral development, predicated on a cognitive model, was formally initiated by Kohlberg in the 1960's. Kohlberg's model of moral development emphasized a linear, sequential, and hierarchical sequencing of stages (Weinberg, Yacker, Orenstein, & DeSarbo, 1993). While many attempts have been made to fully examine Kohlberg's theoretical model of moral development, specific measures have remained cumbersome. Rest (1980) developed the most widely used objective scale based upon Kohlberg's theory: the Defining Issues Test (DIT) has been employed extensively (Kilgannon & Erwin, 1992; Locke & Tucker, 1988; Petry & Kenney, 1992; Sapp, Elliott & Bounds, 1983; Straub & Rodgers, 1978). Although the DIT has been frequently cited, it was not selected due to several issues germane to this study.

Because the construct of moral reasoning is complex, objective measures of moral reasoning have been only minimally successful. In his extensive review of the literature, Blasi (1980) emphasized the importance of using production measures as a mechanism for detecting moral actions that are consistent with cognitive levels of moral reasoning. While Kohlberg's Moral Judgement Interview (MJI) has been the most widely used production measure, the MJI relies heavily on specific moral dilemmas. Gibbs, Basinger, and Fuller (1992) suggest that specific moral dilemmas are not only unnecessary, but restrictive. Instead, it is preferable to use an instrument that utilizes open-ended stimuli instead of specific moral dilemmas.

Secondly, Sutton (1992) questioned the appropriateness of the DIT for use with ethnic minorities. Therefore, the Sociomoral Reflection Measure-Short Form (SRM-SF; Gibbs, et al., 1992) was selected for use in this study based upon evidence that indicated the instrument may be a potentially appropriate production measure for use with ethnic minority groups. Measurement of moral development in ethnically diverse populations is of considerable importance given the paucity of instruments available for this purpose (Sutton, 1992).

Moral development theories have also been dichotomized as either justice or care oriented. Kohlberg's model has been criticized as emphasizing the justice orientation in which decisions are based upon issues related to concepts of justice, reciprocity, and individual rights (Weinberg et al., 1993). Alternatively, Gilligan's (1993) theory has focused on issues related to care of individuals and relationships. Similarly, Blasi (1980) concedes that moral actions may be the result of noncognitive personality characteristics. Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) propose that the dimensions of justice and care are present for both men and women, and that men are more likely to think about a moral dilemma from a justice orientation, while women are more likely to present a care orientation when confronted with a moral dilemma. In either case, personality factors may influence the decisions made when moral dilemmas are presented. Therefore, selection of an instrument to detect and accurately measure moral development can be potentially impacted by the care/justice orientation of the individual.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Weinberg et al. (1993) argue that open-ended interview response formats are more appropriate for inclusion of the care orientation. In addition to the free-response format, the SRM-SF facilitates investigation of the differences in moral reasoning with respect to the care and justice modes. Three of the questions specifically address moral dilemmas that are related to law and legal justice, while several of the remaining items could be interpreted as being associated with care. Use of the SRM-SF will allow for investigation of gender differences that may exist independent of the mode or orientation of the individual.

While ethnicity and gender are important factors that may be related to level of moral reasoning, it is hypothesized that early environmental influences may also impact level of moral development. An investigation of one aspect of early environmental influences, size of community, will be conducted. Summarily, the factors of age, ethnicity, gender, and environmental influences will be examined relative to this specific group of nontraditional college students.

Method

Sample

Nontraditional students participating in a new student orientation program comprised the sample for this study. During the orientation session the SRM-SF was distributed (N=70) and participants were asked to return the completed instrument at their earliest possible convenience. Demographic characteristics including gender, ethnicity, and size of hometown were collected for purposes of analysis. Of the 30 (54% return rate) completed protocols, only 27 yielded scorable responses. Subjects ranged in age from 20 to 57, with the mean age reported as 32. Nine of the respondents were male and 21 were female. The largest proportion of the sample was white (73%), yet 22% of the sample reported ethnic minority status. Completed protocols were scored utilizing procedures developed by Gibbs, et al., (1992).

Protocols yielded developmental levels for each of the 11 items. Additionally, summary scores which consisted of the means on the SRM-SF, were calculated to yield the Sociomoral Reflection Maturity Score (SRMS). This scoring technique yielded a modal stage, or the stage used most frequently by the individual. Summary scores (SRMS) ranging between 1-4, and corresponding to Stages 1-4 (Gibbs, Arnold, & Burkhart, 1984) were used to examine differences that were perceived to exist between men and women, individuals of different ethnicities, and size of hometown community.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Instrumentation

The measurement of moral judgement is based upon reasons that individuals offer for decisions related to fair behavior. Gibbs, et al. (1992) utilize the term sociomoral judgment because of a proposed social and personal interaction that ultimately influences the morality of a decision. Further, they argue that these decisions are influenced by relations between persons and the nature of the interactions. Stages of moral development then, are characterized by a person's justifications for their actions relative to interpersonal relationships.

Historically, levels of moral development have been measured through use of items which rely upon specific moral dilemmas. Content specific dilemmas are dependent upon relevance and timeliness of societal issues. Therefore, specific dilemmas introduce an inherent measurement restriction that greatly reduces the generalizability of longitudinal research. The SRM-SF, which is comprised of 11 general questions, does not use specific dilemmas therefore, items are not entirely dependent upon relevance of specific societal issues.

Additionally, response format is open-ended, thus allowing for a more accurate measure of an individual's true level of moral reasoning. Because responses must be generated by the individual, there is less likelihood of obtaining a response on the basis of familiarity with an objective selection. The first four questions are designed to elicit responses related to contract and life. These questions focus on promise keeping (contract) and the reasoning or rationale offered for telling the truth. Questions 5-6 focus on issues of affiliation. Affiliation is defined as relationships that may exist between friends or family. Questions 7-8 address issues related to the value of human life. For example, life is valued for reasons related to society or God. Property and law questions are addressed in items 9-10. Justifications for following the law are addressed in these questions. Finally, question 11 attempts to evaluate an individual's adherence to legal justice. Protocols are scorable only if at least 7 of the questions yield scorable responses.

Regardless of the aspect (contract, affiliation, law, or legal justice) of the question, scoring yields qualitatively different, progressively more mature levels of sociomoral reasoning. Levels of moral reasoning are reported to range from Level One through Level Four. Stage One is defined as the unilateral and physicalistic stage of moral development. Individuals functioning at Stage One are typically more extrinsically motivated and make decisions based upon rules imposed by perceived authority figures. Frequently, responses are based upon power or one's physical ability to overcome a situation. Stage Two parallels Piaget's notion of reciprocity and is characterized by decisions based upon pragmatic deals or social favors. Reasoning at the Second Stage evolves beyond use of physical power to accomplish one's goals, and includes the narrow viewpoint that decisions should be based upon exchanges within relationships. Because reasoning at Stage Two is based upon exchanges, Gibbs, et al. (1992) describe this reasoning as extrinsic and superficial.

Mature levels of moral reasoning do not emerge until individuals respond at levels Three or Four which are characterized by "cognitive decentration"; an ability to understand social role

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

taking. Stage Three reasoning is based almost entirely upon interpersonal relationships. Among the issues addressed at this stage are empathic role-taking, relationships, and caring. Stage Four is the highest level of sociomoral reflection which is based on a complex social system. Individuals responding at this level justify their actions relative to the importance for a moral society, obligations to society, and integrity.

Results

In their most recent validation study, Basinger, Gibbs and Fuller (in press) reported that university students obtained a mean global stage of three (3.12), whereas adults scored at the fourth level (3.50). Participants in this study responded at levels consistent with Stage Three of moral development (Mean=2.997). Individual item means and standard deviations are reported below.

Insert Table 1 about here

The average age of Basinger's et al. (in press) high school group was 17 , the university mean age was 19, and the adult sample mean age was 50. Although the average age for subjects participating in this study was 32, the mean global scores were more comparable to scores for the high school sample (2.96) obtained by Basinger, et al. [t (26)=.635; p=.531]. When compared to Basinger's et al. university sample with a mean age of 19, this sample of subjects scored significantly lower [t(26)=-2.054; p=.05]. Finally, when this sample was compared to that of Basinger's et al. adult population (mean age 50) this entering group of adult students responded at lower levels of moral reasoning than did the typical university or adult population reported by Basinger et al. [t(26)=-8.44; p<.0001].

A second important consideration in this study was investigation of differences that may exist between individuals based upon ethnicity. An ANOVA yielded nonsignificant differences on the global SRMS [F(2,23)=2.146; p=.14] based on ethnicity suggesting that individuals in this study did not differ on levels of moral development.

It was hypothesized that men and women would respond at different levels of moral development. Again, to assess differences in moral reasoning, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted using SRMS as the dependent variable. Between gender differences yielded nonsignificant results [F(1,25)=1.505; p=.23] for the overall SRM-SF score. Further investigation revealed one statistically significant difference [F(1,21)=5.671; p=.03] for item number 10. Item 10 posits the question, how important is it to "obey the law". A significant difference on this item would support the hypothesis that men and women differ with respect to the justice mode. This hypothesized directional difference was confirmed with a higher mean score obtained for men (3.5) than for women (2.9).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Reported size of hometown community did not produce significant differences on the overall SRMS score [F(3,23)=1.821; p=.17]. Although significant differences were not found when size of community was delineated based upon four categories, a simple comparison of rural versus urban communities yielded significant results. When the categories of city and large city were grouped together and town and rural community were condensed, a significant difference between the two was obtained [F(1,25)=4.820; p=.04]. Mean scores on the SRMS indicate that the urban group scored higher (Mean=3.13) than individuals reporting a rural hometown community (Mean=2.89). While this difference is significant, it should be interpreted with caution due to the limited size of the sampling.

Summary and Discussion

Previous research (Basinger et al., in press) provided preliminary normative global mean scores for specific subpopulations of individuals including university students and adults. Entering adult student global mean scores obtained in this study were substantially lower than scores that had been previously obtained by Basinger et al. Comparison of results from this study to the normative sample suggest that the experience gained in a postsecondary environment significantly impacts the overall level of moral development. In addition to a comparison of age related subpopulations it was also important to examine related factors that may have impacted moral reasoning.

Controversy exists regarding the cultural influence of moral development, therefore it was important to empirically examine this question. When global mean scores were examined relative to ethnicity results were nonsignificant. However, generalizability of these results should be interpreted with caution due to limited sample size.

Additionally, gender related arguments of moral reasoning have included different theoretical orientations that began with Kohlberg's initial attempts to measure the construct of moral development. Kohlberg and Gilligan offer theoretical orientations that differ with respect to either an emphasis on justice or care modes of moral reasoning. Kohlberg's justice model categorizes women as lower in the hierarchal scheme of moral development because the justice mode is not as prominent for women.

In this study global mean scores did not significantly differ with respect to gender. A lack of overall significant differences on the SRM-SF would suggest an equivalence between men and women because this measure includes both aspects of justice and caring. Additionally, the significant differences that emerged on the justice component of the SRM-SF support the notion that men utilize the unilateral justice mode more frequently than women. However, some have suggested (Gilligan, 1993; Hepburn, 1993) that a single justice framework for moral reasoning may not adequately encompass the larger construct of moral development. Further, Gilligan posits that women make decisions based on numerous factors that may be unique to the individual. Compassion, empathy, and an ability to understand the plight of another individual are not qualities recognized by earlier measures of moral reasoning. Therefore, results of this study

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

are consistent with Gibbs, et al. (1984) assertion that there are gender differences in moral reasoning that can only be attributed to womens' unique and intricate conceptualization of a moral dilemma which is often includes a care component.

In addition to factors of ethnicity and gender, it was important to investigate early environmental influences. These preliminary results suggest that living in a rural environment may impede the progress of moral reasoning. Little research has been conducted which compares size of hometown community as a source of variation therefore, it would be important to not only investigate the size of the community, but additional related factors which could potentially offer insight into the development of principled moral reasoning.

Continued teleological study of characteristics of non-traditional students possesses the potential for clarifying the process of moral development. An understanding of the developmental levels of this emerging majority of students will serve as a fundamental cornerstone for improvement of campus communities. Because results of this study suggest that exposure to a postsecondary experience does contribute to development of moral reasoning, it is important to understand not only the process of moral development, but the specific experiences that impact these individuals. Ultimately, results of this study and similar research could be used as additional support for improvement of a more integrated educational curriculum emphasizing tolerance and respect for individuals within an increasingly more global society.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 1
Mean SRM-SF Scores and Standard Deviations

Item	Mean	SD
Question 1	3.192	.511
Question 2	3.146	.840
Question 3	3.479	.275
Question 4	3.021	.714
Question 5	3.159	.447
Question 6	3.029	.450
Question 7	2.881	.552
Question 8	2.948	.485
Question 9	2.521	.840
Question 10	3.043	.601
Question 11	2.917	.879
Total	2.997	.309

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

References

Basinger, K. S., Gibbs, J. C., & Fuller, D. (in press). Context and the measurement of moral judgement. International Journal of Behavioral Development.

Blasi, A. (1980). Bridging moral cognition and moral action: A critical review of the literature. Psychological Bulletin, 88 , 1-45.

Gibbs, J. C., Arnold, K. D., & Burkhart, J. E., (1984). Sex differences in the expression of moral judgement. Child Development, 55, 1040-1043.

Gibbs, J. C., Basinger, K. S., & Fuller, D. (1992). Moral maturity: Measuring the development of sociomoral reflection. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Gilligan, C. (1993). In a different voice. (Rev. ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gilligan, C., & Attanucci, J. (1988). Two moral orientations. In C. Gilligan, J.V. Ward, & J. M. Taylor (Eds.), Mapping the moral domain. Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of Gender, Education and Human Development.

Hepburn, E. R. (1993). Women and ethics: a 'seeing' justice? Journal of Moral Education, 23, 27-38.

Kilgannon, S. M., & Erwin, T. D. (1992). A longitudinal study about the identity and moral development of Greek students. Journal of College Student Development, 33 (3), 253-259.

Kitchener, K. S. (1982). Human development and the college campus: Sequences and tasks. In G. R. Hanson (Ed.), Measuring Student Development. (New Directions for Student Services, No. 20).

Kitchener, K. S., King, P. M., Davison, M. L.,Parker, C. A., & Wood, P. K. (1984). A longitudinal study of moral and ego development in young adults. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 13 (3), 197-211.

Locke, D. C., & Tucker, D. O., Jr. (1988). Race and moral judgment development scores. Counseling and Values, 32, 232-235.

Mason, M. G. & Gibbs, J. C. (1993). Social perspective taking and moral judgment among college students. Journal of Adolescent Research, 8 , 109-123.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Petry, J. R., & Kenney, G. E. (1992). Project about face evaluation report (Report No. CG 024 392). Memphis, TN: Bureau of Educational Research Services. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 347 462).

Rest, J. R. & Thoma, S. J. (1985). Relation of moral judgment development to formal education. Developmental Psychology, 21, 709-714.

Sapp, G. L., Elliott, G. R., & Bounds, S. (1983). Dealing with diversity among college students. Humanistic Education and Development, 22 (2), 80-85.

Straub, C., & Rodgers, R. F. (1978). Fostering moral development in college women. Journal of College Student Personnel, 19 (5), 430-436.

Sutton, R. E. (1992). Review of the Defining Issues Test. In J.J. Kramer & J.C. Cononley (Eds.), The eleventh mental measurements yearbook (pp 268-269). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Weinberg, W., Yacker, N., Orenstein, S., & DeSarbo, W. (1993). Care and justice moral reasoning: A multidimensional scaling approach. Multivariate behavioral research, 28 (4), 435-465.

aera96.wpd

BEST COPY AVAILABLE